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**BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO?:  
EXPLAINING FAILED BREAKUPS**

Running head: Explaining Failed Breakups

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## Abstract

Drawing on a developmental perspective, we extend beyond the marital reconciliation literature to examine the fluidity of relationships among young adult daters and cohabitators. We analyze recently collected data on young adults ( $n = 808$ ) and find that nearly half experience a breakup followed by a reconciliation and about half of those who breakup continue a sexual relationship (“sex with an ex”). Among these young adults, cohabitators experience greater relationship fluidity than daters. We assess how individual demographic, social psychological, and relationship factors are associated with the risks of reconciliations and sex with an ex. These findings showcase that young adult relationships are characterized by volatility and challenge theoretical and empirical understandings of the stability of relationships.

In family research we typically conceive of the experience of “relationship instability” as undergoing a transition from being in a relationship to not being in one. This ignores the possibility that there may truly be “instability” in relationships; that is, relationships in which partners are neither stably together nor completely broken up. For instance, marital separations are often followed by periods of reconciliation (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wineberg, 1996a). Due to the relative frequency of these separations and reconciliations, Binstock and Thornton explain that “union trajectories are dynamic and involve a heterogeneous and multidirectional array of transitions” (2003: 432). This is problematic because demographers and other family researchers privilege the concept of relationship duration, relying on a conceptualization of relationships as clearly dichotomized: together or broken up.

The age at first marriage in the United States is at an historical highpoint (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), allowing for a wide variety of premarital sexual and relationship experiences during late adolescence and young adulthood. This growth in sexual and cohabiting relationships prior to marriage (Cherlin, 2009; Cohen & Manning, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008) results in increased opportunities for breakups and reconciliations but little is known about these relationship events outside of the marital context. Breakups are expected to be more common in young adult dating and cohabiting relationships than in marriage while reconciliations may be less likely due to lower commitment levels. Furthermore, as the lines between breaking up and being in a relationship are blurred, the sexual relationships may extend across relationship boundaries.

Drawing on a developmental perspective and recently collected data on young adults we examine how often dating and cohabiting breakups, like marital separations, involve

reconciliations. Within the context of these dating and cohabiting relationships, we term the process of a breakup followed by reconciliation as a “relationship disruption.” Additionally, we assess the nature of breakups in terms of whether they involve a continuation of a sexual relationship (“sex with an ex”). This work contributes to our understanding of romantic relationships in early adulthood and extends beyond the marital literature by examining the frequency of relationship disruptions as well as the nature of instability in young adult dating and cohabiting relationships.

## **BACKGROUND**

Many dating relationships proceed in fits and starts, rather than following a linear path that leads to a breakup or deeper commitment. This is commonly how we think about adolescent relationships. Arnett describes romantic relationships during the adolescent years as “tentative and transient” (Arnett, 2000: 473). Also, during this stage in the life course “casual sex” encounters are likely to be between exes (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006); although the romantic relationship has technically ended, the sexual relationship continues. However, we tend to assume that these relationship patterns change in young adulthood, becoming more stable in accordance with other developmental changes.

Many studies examining the nature and progression of relationships among young adults stop observing respondents once they experience a breakup (see, for example, Arriaga, 2001; Sprecher, 1999). This means that they are censored from further inclusion if the period of their breakup spans a data collection point and excludes the possibility of observing the on-going relationship experiences of those who later reconcile. While these studies can be instructive in helping us to conceptualize the form and meaning of romantic relationships among young adults, they provided a limited lens on relationships.

Snyder states that “Learning how to form, maintain, and gracefully end romantic and sexual relationships with others is arguably one of the critical developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood” (2000: 161). It is during young adulthood that romantic relationships come to be one of the primary emotional supports and attachments in people’s lives, joining or even supplanting relationships with parents and friends (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Wied, 2007). By young adulthood, Arnett (2000) argues, people should be looking for a longer-term partner, rather than someone in whom they are only immediately interested. This is precisely why the issues of relationship disruptions and sex with an ex are essential to understand; they speak to the abilities of young adults to both “maintain” and “gracefully end” relationships that are of increasing importance at this stage in the life course.

Understanding these relationship patterns is important because they can affect relationship trajectories going forward. Young adults who reconcile may be prone to a behavior pattern that involves cycling through relationship formation and dissolution. For example, Wineberg (1999) reports that reconciliations in a first marriage are a factor hastening the pace of second marriages. Furthermore, having sex with an ex may be problematic because former partners can have difficulty moving on from an old relationship or building new romantic attachments while preoccupied by a connection with an ex (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Having sex with an ex also may be a risky sexual behavior because former partners may not take the STI and pregnancy precautions they would in other sexual encounters outside of a monogamous relationship; this is because these encounters are occurring between intimately familiar partners. These failed breakups, the disruptions and having sex with an ex, are on-going relationships, neither ended nor stable.

## Reconciliations

Much of what we know about relationship disruptions comes from studies of adult relationships. Estimates of reconciliations among married couples vary, and most of the literature is quite dated and may not reflect contemporary experiences. However, studies consistently demonstrate that this relationship experience is not infrequent across the population. Estimates of married couples who will experience at least one period of separation followed by reconciliation during the course of their relationship range from 10 to 17 percent (Kitson, 1985; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994); forty percent of separated married couples *attempt* reconciliation (Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wineberg, 1996a). Although this is not an uncommon experience, it is not a guarantee of stability. Morgan (1988) reports that 15 percent of married couples remain reconciled three to four years later and Wineberg (1994, 1996b), using more recently collected data, finds that after one year one-quarter of black women and one-third of white women who reconciled with their husbands remain with their spouses. Reconciliation attempts, however, are not randomly distributed across the population. Wineberg (1995) shows that older and more educated women and those with longer marriages were less likely to attempt a reconciliation when their first marriages ended.

Couples that are in more committed relationships may be less likely to reconcile. Evidence based on white respondents who were young adults in the 1980s indicates that cohabiting couples are less likely to reconcile than married couples (Binstock & Thornton, 2003). Following this logic, we should expect that daters are even less likely to reconcile after breaking up, given that they have invested less (not having a shared living space) and are potentially less committed than cohabitators. However, there is no recent study of a racially diverse, young adult sample and none that specifically compares cohabiting and dating relationships.

Another perspective is that less committed couples may experience more reconciliations precisely because they are not in committed relationships and are seeking to discover the meaning of their relationships. Studies that consider relationship disruptions among samples of college students are limited in their generalizability, but do document the fluidity of young adult relationships (e.g., Bevan, Cameron, & Dillow, 2003; Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Dillow, Mose, & Afifi, 2008). Dailey et al. (2009) studied college students who were in “on/off” relationships, finding that they were together for longer than those who simply broke up and that the disruptions in their relationships typically lasted one to two months. As couples experienced more disruptions, they were more likely to report feeling less satisfied, having lower relationship commitment and lower passion, were more uncertain about their relationships, had more ineffective conflict, and displayed greater aggression towards their partners. Yet qualitative evidence suggests that the reasons on/off daters give for their breakups are the same as those who break up without reconciling, namely lower relationship satisfaction and problems with conflict (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Many, however, describe on-going contact with their exes after breaking up and being uncertain of the status of their relationships. Dailey, et al., speculate that it is these post-breakup features of the relationship that may lead to reconciling rather than remaining broken up.

#### **CURRENT INVESTIGATION**

In this paper we focus on two relationship behaviors, which we term examples of “failed breakups.” These are relationship disruptions in which a couple breaks up and gets back together or continues having sex after formally ending their romantic relationship. We refer to disruptions and having sex with an ex as failed breakups because these are experiences in which a couple is neither stably together nor stably broken up; that is, their attempt at breaking up has not been

fully realized. Our work focuses on nonmarital relationships in part because a key distinction between nonmarital relationships (dating and cohabitation) and marriage is that marriage is a contract governed by default exit rules (that is, a legal divorce) (Nock, 2009). While marital reconciliations might generally be assumed to be a good thing, the reconciliations of disrupted dating and cohabiting relationships might be indicative of more problematic relationship patterns (as described above); therefore we use the term 'disruption' to describe the dating equivalent of a marital breakup and reconciliation. We observe the frequencies of these failed breakup behaviors among young adults and examine the demographic, social psychological, and relationship characteristics that are associated with each.

Prior work has shown racial differences in marital reconciliation behaviors. Wineberg and his colleagues have found that while black women are more likely to experience a marital reconciliation, these are less likely to last, compared with those of white women (Wineberg, 1994, 1996b; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994). We expect that black young adults may, therefore, be more likely to experience failed breakups. Two aspects of family background may also contribute to young adults' relationship stability: natal family structure (Teachman, 2002) and socioeconomic status (McLanahan, 2004). Those raised outside two-parent households and those from more socioeconomically disadvantaged families may be more prone to experiencing failed breakups.

Research on social psychological indicators finds that those with low levels of self-efficacy or sense of control are more likely to be in and remain in poor quality marriages (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Waite et al., 2002); similarly, they may be more likely to unsuccessfully end dating or cohabiting relationships. We expect that respondents with a greater sense of control may be less likely to experience a failed breakup.



The most proximate set of factors associated with failed breakups are relationship characteristics. Previous qualitative research on disrupted relationships has found that the predominant reason couples give for breaking up is that they were arguing or fighting a lot (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Additionally, those in disrupted relationships report receiving less validation from their partners (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009). Simpson (1987) finds that closeness between partners is predictive of stability in dating relationships and of greater emotional distress following breakup. Greater intimacy may therefore be associated with a higher likelihood of a couples reuniting, drawn back together by their closeness and to ward off their distress following the breakup. Finally, Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, and Clark (2009) find that those with lasting dating relationships show higher levels of commitment than those who experience disruptions. Therefore, we expect that those with higher levels of conflict, less validation, greater intimacy, and less commitment will be more likely to experience failed breakups. We are able to compare the strength of associations between failed breakup behaviors and demographic versus social psychological versus relationship quality characteristics in turn.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) data is based on a stratified, random sample of 1,321 students registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in Lucas County, Ohio, an urban, metropolitan area largely consisting of the city of Toledo. Incorporating over-samples of black and Hispanic youths, the initial sample was devised by the National Opinion Research Center and was drawn from the enrollment records of 62 schools from seven school districts. Respondents completed interview questionnaires at home using laptop computers, and school attendance was not a requirement for inclusion in the sample. Census data indicate that this

sample shares similar socio-demographic characteristics with the Toledo MSA in terms of education, median family income, marital status, and racial distribution. In the present study, we rely on the Wave 4 respondents who were interviewed in 2006 when they were 17-24 years old. These data are well suited for these analyses because the respondents were recently interviewed and the TARS is one of the few data sources which includes information on disruptions as well as sexual behavior with exes.

The initial analytic sample is comprised of those who are currently or have recently been in a dating or cohabiting relationship ( $n = 808$ ) with a total of 606 daters and 202 cohabitators. That is, those who have not dated anyone in the past two years (or not dated anyone seriously) and are therefore *not at risk* for a relationship disruption are excluded. Respondents report on this current or most recent focal relationship. We choose to include both those reporting on current and previous relationships because previous research has shown that the boundaries defining the end of a relationship are quite fluid. For example, among adolescents who report having had sex outside a romantic relationship, nearly two-thirds say they did so with an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006).

We exclude the 59 married couples from this sample for two reasons. First, they are representative only of couples who marry early, as all have married before the national average age at first marriage; consequently results could not be generalized to all married couples or compared against results from previous studies of married couples that used older samples. Second, this is a fairly small sample of married couples, making it difficult to detect the influence of various factors on their breakup behaviors.

Respondents are asked about having had sex with an ex with regards to their focal relationship; that is, have they experienced a breakup and, if so, sex with this ex, during their

focal relationship. In examining having sex with an ex, only those who have broken up with someone in the past two years are included in the sample ( $n = 477$ ); those who have not dated or who are stably dating one partner are excluded. Someone who has not dated in the past two years or who is currently dating could still have sex with an ex (by sleeping with an ex from more than two years ago or cheating, respectively); however, we do not examine these alternative forms of having sex with an ex in the present analyses. We examine more current relationship experiences and sex with an ex that occurs after a breakup or during a disruption in that relationship. This is a total of 368 daters and 109 cohabitators.

### Measures

#### *Dependent variables*

Respondents are asked how many times they have broken up in their focal relationship. For those who are reporting on a current relationship, we consider the number of breakups they report as their number of *disruptions* (that is, separations followed by reconciliations; ranging from zero to ten). For those who are reporting on a previous relationship, we subtract one (the final breakup) from the number of breakups they report and use this as a measure of their number of disruptions. Respondents who indicate they have broken up in their focal relationship at least one time are asked if they ever had sex with this ex-partner while broken up (0 = no, 1 = yes); this is our measure of having *sex with an ex*.

#### *Independent variables*

The individual indicators include gender (*male* = 1), respondent's *age*, and race/ethnicity (*white*, *black*, *Hispanic*, and *other/mixed* race). The family structure the respondent lived in as a teenager, at Wave 1, is based on a four category measure (*two-parent*, *single-parent*, *stepparent*, or an *alternative arrangement* with no parents). We use the respondent's parent's level of education as a proxy for family socioeconomic status (parents are classified as having *less than a*

*high school degree, a high school degree, some college, or a college degree*); this was measured by parental self-reports at Wave 1.

The primary relationship status measure indicates whether the respondent is in a cohabiting or dating relationship. We also include a dummy variable indicating whether the focal relationship is on-going (current) or ended.

We include a measure of a respondent's *sense of control*, which is constructed following Mirowsky and Ross' (1990) formulation. Respondents rate their agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to the following items: I can do just about anything I really set my mind to; I have little control over the bad things that happen to me; My misfortunes are the result of mistakes I have made; I am responsible for my failures; The really good things that happen to me are mostly luck; There's no sense in planning a lot – if something good is going to happen it will; Most of my problems are due to bad breaks; and, I am responsible for my own success. A higher score is indicative of a higher sense of personal control over successes and failures.

We examine both negative and positive aspects of the relationship. We measure *relationship conflict* using a scale of how often (never to very often) the respondent reports she and her partner: have disagreements or arguments; yell or shout at each other; and, have disagreements about their relationship (alpha = .85); a higher score indicates more conflict. Receiving *validation* from a partner is captured by a scale of two items: partner makes me feel attractive and partner makes me feel good about myself (alpha = .81); a higher score indicates receiving more validation. *Intimate self-disclosure* is measured by how often (never to very often) the respondent reports talking about the following topics with her partner: something really bad that happened; her home life and family; her private thoughts and feelings; and, her future (alpha = .91); a higher score indicates more frequent disclosure. *Commitment* is measured

by how strongly on a five-point scale the respondent agrees that she “may not want to be with [partner] a few years from now” for those currently in a relationship or that she “didn’t want to be with [partner] long term” for those reporting on an ended relationship; a higher score indicates stronger commitment.

### Analysis

We present bivariate distributions of failed breakups for key independent variables. We next estimate a series of regression models that control for basic demographic characteristics and then add social psychological, negative, and positive relationship characteristics in turn. This strategy takes into account both individual, family, and dyadic factors. The analysis of disruptions relies on ordinary least squares regression models and we present coefficients and standard errors. The analysis of having sex with an ex is based on logistic regression models and we present odds ratios and standard errors.

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the sample of young adults as well as the proportion experiencing at least one relationship disruption or having had sex with an ex by relationship status, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and family characteristics. The majority of this sample is composed of daters, those who are currently in a relationship, and whites. The sample is fairly evenly divided between male and female respondents. Just less than half of respondents lived in two-parent households, a quarter in single-parent households, a fifth in stepparent households, and only five percent lived in other living arrangements as adolescents. Twelve percent of respondents have a parent with less than a high school education, while just under a third of the sample has a parent with a high school diploma, another third has a parent with some education beyond high school, and just under a quarter has a parent with a college degree.

[Table 1 about here]

Across the sample, the average number of relationship disruptions is 1.061 (SD = 1.849). Among young adults who experienced at least one disruption the average number was 2.446 (SD = 2.186), showing that for those who do experience a disruption, this is not usually a one-time event. Approaching half (44 percent) of young adults experience a relationship disruption, indicating this is quite a common experience across all young adults in the sample. We find that disruptions are significantly more common for cohabitators than daters. About 43 percent of dating young adults has experienced a disruption at least once while half of cohabiting young adults have done so at least one time. There are no significant differences in relationship disruption experiences by current relationship status, gender, or age. Among the TARS respondents, relationship disruptions are more common in all non-white groups and are significantly more common among blacks relative to whites. In fact, further analyses reveal that having experienced at least one disruption is the majority experience for blacks daters and cohabitators as well as for Hispanic and other/mixed race cohabitators. All those raised outside a two-parent family are significantly more likely to have experienced a relationship disruption and to have had sex with an ex, compared to those from two-parent families. Those whose parents have not graduated from high school are significantly more likely to have experienced a disruption compared to those whose parents have a high school diploma.

The final column of Table 1 indicates that having sex with an ex is quite common among people who have broken up with a partner; about half of young adults who have broken up with a partner report having had sex with their ex. Cohabitators are significantly more likely to have had sex with an ex; nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of cohabiting young adults who break up experience sex with an ex in contrast to two-fifths (41 percent) of daters. Respondents who are

reporting on current relationships are significantly more likely to report having had sex with an ex than are respondents who have terminated their relationships. Similar proportions of men and women have had sex with an ex. Older respondents are significantly more likely to report having had sex with an ex. Just over half of blacks and Hispanics who have broken up had sex with an ex; blacks are significantly more likely than whites to have had sex with an ex. Those who lived in single or stepparent households as teens are significantly more likely to have had sex with an ex than those who lived with both parents. Those whose parents had a college degree are significantly less likely than others to have had sex with an ex, compared to those whose parents have a high school degree. Overall the findings indicate that failed breakups are a common occurrence among young adults, with some subgroups experiencing failed breakups more often than others.

Table 2 displays the results of the five OLS multivariate models predicting relationship disruptions. In Model 1, gender and age are not associated with relationship disruptions. We find that blacks experience significantly more relationship disruptions than white young adults. None of the family background variables are significantly associated with relationship disruptions. Young adults who are currently in a relationship have experienced fewer disruptions than those who have ended their relationships. Young adults who cohabit experienced more disruptions in the bivariate model but in Model 1 in Table 2 they share similar numbers of disruptions as dating young adults. In Model 2 we see that sense of control is not significantly associated with experiencing relationship disruptions. Model 3 shows that relationship conflict is positively and significantly associated with disruptions; once we control for relationship conflict, the differences between those currently in a relationship and those who are broken up and between blacks and whites are no longer significant. However, with the introduction of the conflict scale,

having a parent who did not graduate from high school becomes positively and significantly associated with disruptions. Model 4 shows that young adults who feel more validated by their partner and are more committed to their partner experience fewer disruptions while young adults with greater levels of intimate self-disclosure have more frequent disruptions. In Model 6, conflict remains significantly associated with disruptions, while validation and self-disclosure are marginally significant and commitment becomes insignificant. The final model explains approximately 18 percent of the variance in relationship disruption experiences.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 displays the results of six logistic regression models predicting having sex with ex. In Model 1, males and females share similar odds of having sex with an ex. Older respondents are more likely to have sex with an ex. Whites, blacks and Hispanics share similar odds of experiencing sex with an ex. The initial racial difference in the bivariate model is explained by the inclusion of the family background indicators. Young adults raised in stepparent families are marginally significantly more likely to report having sex with an ex than those raised by two parents. Young adults who have ended their relationship or are currently in a relationship share similar odds of having sex with an ex. Young adults who cohabit have more than twice the odds of having sex with an ex as young adults who are dating. In Model 2, we find that sense of control is not associated with sex with an ex. Model 3 shows that young adults who have greater relationship conflict have higher odds of sex with an ex (but as we see in Model 6, this association is explained by the inclusion of intimate self-disclosure and relationship disruptions). In Model 4, neither receiving more partner validation nor commitment are protective factors against having sex with an ex, while intimate self-disclosure is tied to higher odds of having sex with an ex. The final indicator, in Model 5, is whether a respondent experienced a relationship



disruption. Young adults who had relationships disruptions have higher odds of having sex with an ex. The final model explains approximately 16 percent of the variance in having sex with an ex.

[Table 3 about here]

Higher levels of conflict, more frequent intimate self-disclosure, and lower feelings of validation are risk factors for relationship disruptions, as are being black and having parents who did not graduate from high school. Older people and cohabitators are more likely to have sex with an ex; intimate self-disclosure and relationship disruptions are risk factors for having sex with an ex. Finally, there are indications that this failed breakup relationship pattern may be more likely among young adults than those in their late teens. While age is not a significant predictor of experiencing relationship disruptions, it is a positive and significant predictor of having sex with an ex (robust to the inclusion of controls). Given that our sample spans from the late teen years to the early twenties, it may be that this failed breakup “package” of behaviors takes shape as teens enter young adulthood.

## **DISCUSSION**

Failed breakups appear to be a common part of the young adult relationship experience. Just less than half of the young adults in this sample have experienced at least one relationship disruption in their present or most recent relationship (and just under one-quarter have experienced more than one disruption). Half of cohabitators and the majority of young adults who are black, Hispanic, or of other/mixed race have experienced at least one disruption in their present or most recent relationship. Likewise, just less than half of the young adults who have ever broken up with their focal partner report having had sex with this ex. In fact, the majority of cohabitators and young adults who are black or Hispanic have had sex with their ex during a

breakup or disruption. The frequency of disruptions among these young adult daters and cohabitators is much higher than that observed among married couples (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Bumpass, Castro Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Wineberg, 1996a); the nature of these dating and cohabiting relationships may mean these partners are more willing to break up under less extreme circumstances, making the possibility of successful reconciliation more likely.

Generally, these failed breakup behaviors are fairly common among all young adults. In fact, because our analyses only use data on respondents' focal relationships (present or most recent relationships), we are probably far under-representing the likelihood of young adults having *ever* experienced a relationship disruption or had sex with an ex.

The likelihood of cohabitators who break up having sex with an ex is much higher than that of daters, which may be related to them sharing a common living space (proximity may equal opportunity) or may be representative of relatively greater levels of enmeshment. Additionally, those who experience relationship disruptions are more likely to have sex with an ex. That is, they are prone to experiencing multiple aspects of a failed breakup. They may break up, but continue having sex, and then get back together. This relationship churning appears to be driven, in part, by both negative and positive aspects of the relationship. Those who have a relationship disruption are experiencing more relationship conflict, which may be why they break up in the first place, however they also report more intimate self-disclosure, which may prevent them from fully severing ties. This causes the breakup to fail, leading the exes to continue having sex and/or to reconcile. It is important to note that it is both negative *and positive* relationship qualities that play a role in these failed breakups.

Although we use a larger and more representative sample than many previous studies (which tend to focus on convenience samples of college students), we are also limited in

generalizations about young adults' relationship disruptions that we can make based on TARS data. First, because the data are drawn exclusively from one area of the country, we must be cautious about generalizing to other regions. Second, because we only have data from one member of a couple, we are only capturing one person's perspective on the positive and negative aspects of the relationship and only one person's personal and social psychological characteristics, which may impact the relationship and its outcome. The insights the study provides are still useful, however, particularly because Sprecher (1994) finds that there are high levels of couple agreement over who was responsible for and who had control over a breakup, as well as the reasons for the breakup.

That black young adults are more likely to experience both kinds of failed breakups may be in line with relationship behaviors later in life. Black couples who cohabit or marry break up at higher rates than do whites (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Brown, 2000; Manning & Smock, 1995). Future research should examine whether black cohabitators (in later adult life) and spouses are more likely to attempt reconciliations following separations compared with other racial groups. Also, we should ask if the higher likelihood of relationship disruptions among black young adults is similar to the greater likelihood of married black adults separating but not divorcing (within three years of separating, 55 percent of blacks have divorced compared to 91 percent of whites (Cherlin, 1998; see also McAdoo & Young, 2008; Raley & Bumpass, 2003)). That is, to what extent is separation without divorce a form of later-in-life relationship disruption or a continuation of a relationship pattern of disruptions established in young adulthood?

In his studies of marital reconciliations, Wineberg (1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1999) suggests that the women who attempt reconciliations may do so because they are less advantaged and therefore more in need of support from a husband. However, we see frequent disruptions in our

sample of young adult daters who are presumably less likely to be staying in or ending relationships for economic reasons. This indicates that other factors beyond economic need may well be at play in people's decisions to pursue reconciliations, whether in a marital or dating relationship. It is also possible that those who attempt marital reconciliations are following a relational pattern established in earlier life that involved disruptions in dating and cohabiting relationships.

Even though these are common experiences in young adult relationships, there may be risks associated with them. First, Sbarra and Emery (2005) find that those who break up with a partner and maintain contact continue to feel the pain of the breakup more intensely and may have more difficulty moving on. Having sex with an ex could put young adults in this position of technically being broken up, but still emotionally connected. Previous research on the progression of college students' relationships post-breakup finds that those who have sex with their ex mostly described this as a "difficult or negative event, or if the participants were hopeful of regaining their earlier relationship, usually resulted in disappointment, embarrassment, or avoidance by one or both partners...on the other hand, a few of these encounters led to partners' romantic reconciliations" (Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008: 43). Although sex with an ex is a fairly typical part of the breakup process, it may have negative emotional impacts.

Second, those who experience failed breakups have unstable relationships because they fight more, but they also seem not to be able to fully sever their ties because they are bonded by their greater frequency of intimate self-disclosure. Because they cannot fully end their relationship, they continue having sex and then get back together. This relationship pattern may constitute a health risk if they maintain their contraceptive practices from their romantic

relationship during the time they are disrupted and having sex. Previous research has found that condom use is high at the beginning of relationships and drops over time, as partners begin to feel they know each other well and trust each other, and as they switch to using oral contraceptives (Civic, 2000; Gold, Karmiloff-Smith, Skinner, & Morton, 1992; Hammer, Fisher, Fitzgerald, & Fisher, 1996; Keller, 1993; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). These factors of knowing a partner well and having available oral contraceptives may not change when a couple breaks up. Therefore, a couple who just uses oral contraceptives when they are monogamous (and therefore seemingly at less risk of getting an STI) may still do so as they continue having sex while they are technically broken up. However, because they are technically broken up, one or both may also be having sex with someone else during the disruption. In fact, in our sample those who report having sex with an ex are more likely to report also having sex with someone else and to believe their ex had sex with someone else during the breakup (results not shown).

Having multiple sexual partners is associated with an increased STI risk as well as poorer mental health (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham (2010) show that, for young adults, being in a romantic relationship is beneficial for mental health, weight, and risky alcohol and sex behaviors. However, they find that the benefits of being in a committed relationship come largely through the related reduction in sexual partners. Those who experience relationship disruptions might, therefore, receive fewer benefits from being in a committed relationship because they are more likely to have sex with other people during their disruptions.

These potentially risky sexual behaviors are occurring in the context of an on-going relationship for those who have sex during a disruption, which means we as researchers must re-

think our understanding of “casual” sex. Although sex is taking place outside of a romantic relationship, it is certainly far from what we might think of as “casual.” Part of the reason this sexual behavior may be particularly risky is precisely because it is not casual, meaning that people may be less likely to take the precautions they would with a less familiar partner. Studies of sexual behavior and risk-taking in the future must closely examine the relationship context of “casual” sex.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that people who experience multiple relationship transitions, like serial cohabitators and repeat marriers, are more likely to see their subsequent relationships end (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Kreider, 2005; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Teachman, 2003). On one hand, if it is the experience of relationship instability that makes these negative outcomes more likely, then relationship disruptions may also be positively associated with ending a dating relationship, cohabiting union, or marriage in later life. On the other hand, however, if it is the fact that serial cohabitation or marriage normalizes the experience of relationship dissolution, then relationship disruptions may not have a similar effect because those who experience disruptions, as opposed to actual breakups, are not necessarily coming to see that everything is alright and that they can successfully move on after a relationship ends (that is, they are not similarly “desensitized” to breakups). Future research should explore whether those who experience relationship disruptions are more prone to disruptions or breakups in subsequent dating, cohabiting, or marriage relationships.

The common nature of these failed breakup behaviors serves as an important reminder that the definitions we as researchers impose on the relationships we study may be far from accurate. Given the likelihood of couples going through periods of disruption, during which they may continue having sex, our narrow categories (e.g., together or not, exact start and end dates of

relationships, etc.) may not be reflective of the reality of many young adults' relationship experiences. It appears that, for many, relationships may go through periods of being undefined or much more fluid than our survey data would typically lead us to believe.

This also raises concerns about the accuracy of our measures of relationship duration. Future research should explore how couples who experience relationship disruptions and those whose disruptions include a continued sexual relationship think about the length of their relationship – Do they start counting again from zero after every disruption? How long does a separation have to last to be counted as a disruption, rather than a breakup and a later recoupling? The ways respondents report the length of their relationships should influence how we think about and interpret duration measures.

Lastly, we should continue to explore the frequency of disruptions, and related sexual behavior, across the life course among those who are dating, cohabiting, or married. These examinations should make use of recent samples of adults that include multiple racial groups. This study indicates that this research attention may benefit from a greater focus on the influence of individual and relationship characteristics, more than individual proclivities (or social psychological features). We can see if the patterns of disruption found in the present study are unique to young adult dating and cohabiting relationships or, rather, are a defining feature of all romantic relationships for at least a portion of the population.

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Table 1. Sample Characteristics and Percentages of Young Adults Experiencing Failed Breakups.

	Sample Characteristics	Relationship Disruptions (at least once)	Sex with an Ex
Total		44.52%	47.62%
Daters	75.00%	42.57%	40.76%
Cohabiters	25.00%	50.00% <sup>a</sup>	71.56% <sup>a</sup>
Currently in Relationship	72.03%	48.23%	53.24% <sup>a</sup>
Broken Up	27.97%	43.21%	40.71%
Women	53.22%	44.87%	49.42%
Men	46.78%	44.11%	45.75%
Age (mean)	20.37		
18 year olds		42.35%	35.51%
22 year olds		41.90%	50.45% <sup>a</sup>
Whites	63.49%	37.91%	43.88%
Blacks	24.50%	57.97% <sup>a</sup>	55.86% <sup>a</sup>
Hispanics	5.82%	50.94%	51.61%
Other/mixed race	6.06%	53.85%	42.42%
Lived with both parents	49.13%	36.27%	38.43%
Lived with single parent	26.61%	50.23% <sup>a</sup>	53.62% <sup>a</sup>
Lived with stepparent	17.95%	51.72% <sup>a</sup>	56.98% <sup>a</sup>
Other living arrangement	5.07%	68.29% <sup>a</sup>	56.25% <sup>a</sup>
Parent – No HS degree	12.38%	49.00% <sup>a</sup>	58.73%
Parent – HS degree	31.06%	44.22%	50.70%
Parent – Some college	32.67%	46.97%	47.47%
Parent – College degree	22.40%	35.36%	36.27% <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Significantly different than reference group (daters, broken up, 18 year olds, whites, lived with both parents, and parents – high school degree) at or above the .05 level.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Predicting Relationship Disruptions among Young Adults (n = 808).

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 6
		B	B	B	B	B
		SE B	SE B	SE B	SE B	SE B
<b>Individual Factors</b>	Male	-0.112	-0.113	-0.074	-0.147	-0.086
		0.135	0.134	0.125	0.138	0.130
	Age	0.054	0.057	0.028	0.049	0.026
		0.039	0.039	0.036	0.039	0.036
	Black	0.545***	0.543**	0.310†	0.507**	0.309†
		0.171	0.171	0.160	0.171	0.162
	Hispanic	0.131	0.035	-0.112	0.060	-0.086
		0.290	0.290	0.271	0.287	0.271
	Other/Mixed	0.335	0.329	0.174	0.306	0.164
	Race	0.284	0.283	0.264	0.281	0.264
	Lived w/	0.269	0.249	0.069	0.188	0.039
	Single Parent	0.169	0.169	0.158	0.168	0.159
	Lived w/	0.231	0.216	-0.013	0.191	-0.021
	Stepparent	0.186	0.186	0.174	0.184	0.174
	Other living	0.333	0.303	0.080	0.347	0.103
	arrangement	0.322	0.323	0.301	0.319	0.301
	Parent – No	0.354	0.345	0.447*	0.416†	0.469*
	HS degree	0.223	0.223	0.208	0.222	0.209
Parent –	-0.109	-0.100	-0.132	-0.088	-0.124	
Some college	0.164	0.164	0.153	0.163	0.153	
Parent –	-0.197	-0.172	-0.072	-0.184	-0.071	
College	0.185	0.186	0.173	0.183	0.173	
degree						
<b>Relationship Status</b>	Currently in	-0.335*	-0.325*	-0.183	-0.288†	-0.174
	Relationship	0.152	0.152	0.143	0.153	0.144
	Cohabitators	0.206	0.183	0.064	0.229	0.079
		0.164	0.165	0.153	0.163	0.155
<b>Social Psychological Factors</b>	Sense of		-0.232			0.010
	Control		0.158			0.151
<b>Relationship Qualities - Negative</b>	Relationship			0.266***		0.252***
	Conflict			0.024		0.025
<b>Relationship Qualities - Positive</b>	Validation				-0.141**	-0.082†
					0.046	0.044
	Intimate Self-				0.054**	0.032†
	Disclosure				0.021	0.020
				-0.169**	-0.074	
				0.061	0.058	
	Commitment					
	Constant	-0.266	0.075	-1.412†	0.998	-0.852

	0.775	0.798	0.751	0.881	0.848
<b>R-squared</b>	0.049	0.052	0.177	0.075	0.183

† p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001; reference category: gender (female), race (white), family living arrangement (two-parent family), parental education (high school degree), and relationship status (broken up, dating).



Table 3. Logistic Regression Predicting Having Sex with an Ex among Young Adults (n = 477).

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
		O.R.	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.
		SE	SE	SE	SE	SE	SE
<b>Individual Factors</b>	Male	0.914	0.915	0.921	1.045	0.956	1.119
		0.183	0.183	0.186	0.217	0.199	0.244
	Age	1.158*	1.161*	1.152*	1.154*	1.139*	1.140*
		0.067	0.067	0.068	0.068	0.069	0.071
	Black	1.229	1.233	1.143	1.381	1.118	1.261
		0.300	0.301	0.284	0.347	0.287	0.334
	Hispanic	0.716	0.716	0.639	0.775	0.749	0.740
		0.310	0.310	0.278	0.341	0.338	0.344
	Other/Mixed	0.887	0.880	0.845	0.895	0.828	0.810
	Race	0.370	0.367	0.353	0.374	0.362	0.354
	Lived w/ Single	1.385	1.360	1.238	1.360	1.304	1.245
	Parent	0.341	0.336	0.312	0.344	0.336	0.335
	Lived w/	1.648†	1.633†	1.454	1.547	1.567	1.416
	Stepparent	0.466	0.462	0.418	0.443	0.463	0.427
	Other living	1.427	1.385	1.330	1.443	1.477	1.391
	arrangement	0.601	0.585	0.570	0.614	0.655	0.622
	Parent – No HS	1.168	1.153	1.169	1.113	0.993	0.946
	degree	0.385	0.380	0.390	0.376	0.349	0.340
	Parent – Some	0.878	0.887	0.860	0.816	0.873	0.786
college	0.211	0.214	0.209	0.199	0.217	0.200	
Parent – College	0.687	0.700	0.695	0.673	0.718	0.714	
degree	0.192	0.196	0.196	0.191	0.209	0.212	
<b>Relationship Status</b>	Currently in	1.133	1.146	1.069	1.005	0.817	0.734
	Relationship	0.236	0.240	0.226	0.216	0.185	0.171
	Cohabitor	2.714***	2.644***	2.720***	2.688***	2.826***	2.702***
		0.712	0.698	0.723	0.718	0.771	0.760
<b>Social Psychological Factors</b>	Sense of		0.818				0.914
	Control		0.190				0.235

<b>Relationship Qualities - Negative</b>	Relationship Conflict					1.129*** 0.043	1.060 0.046
<b>Relationship Qualities - Positive</b>	Validation					0.893 0.062	0.936 0.069
	Intimate Self-Disclosure					1.103** 0.035	1.093** 0.037
	Commitment					1.085 0.097	1.160 0.110
<b>Failed Break-Ups</b>	Relationship Disruptions						1.417*** 1.376***
	Pseudo R-squared	0.078	0.079	0.094	0.098	0.135	0.157

† p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001; reference category: gender (female), race (white), family living arrangement (two-parent family), parental education (high school degree), and relationship status (broken up, dating).